ACCOUNTABILITY, DEFERRED — Book One

Book One: Parts I and II — Chapters 1 to 6 (Working Title, Draft)

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A Note on Method

This book proceeds chapter by chapter from the hardest-to-dispute material toward more contested, single-source claims, which are explicitly flagged for verification. Every chapter states the strongest form of the opposing case before explaining what that case does and does not answer. Where a pattern – cash transfers, audit failures, opacity, regulatory capture – appears across parties and across governments, the text says so rather than implying it is any one party's vice. Named individuals in unresolved legal matters are kept in strict "alleged" framing throughout; no assertion of guilt is made ahead of adjudication. Each chapter closes with its own sources and a list of specific issues to resolve before the manuscript is print-ready.

Chapter One: Roads and Ruins

The Monsoon as Auditor

Every year, the monsoon performs an audit no government agency dares to conduct. It does not review files or issue redacted reports. It simply falls, and the concrete tells the truth.

In the summer of 2026, that truth arrived within weeks of some of the country's most celebrated infrastructure openings. The Delhi–Dehradun Expressway — inaugurated by the Prime Minister in April at a cost exceeding a billion dollars — developed large potholes near Shamli after its first serious rainfall, a little over two months after opening. The Ganga Expressway in Unnao, Uttar Pradesh, saw a link road cave in outright. The newly built Pune–Mumbai "Missing Link," a project costing roughly ₹6,700 crore, had to shut down for a day after a landslide near one of its tunnels. On the Dwarka Expressway, a flagship ₹9,000-crore corridor between Delhi and Gurugram, service roads lost their asphalt within weeks of repair, and a newly built link near Sectors 102/102A eroded so badly that residents filed complaints. The National Highways Authority of India has since moved to blacklist the contractor behind the Kanpur–Lucknow Expressway after the road caved in barely weeks after its own inauguration.

None of this is freak weather. It is design failure meeting deferred accountability, and it happens on a schedule.

The Numbers Behind the Headlines

Independent tracking by investigative outlets counted 170 bridge collapses and over 200 deaths across India between 2021 and 2025. The government's own figures, drawn from the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, count only 42 collapses over roughly the same period — a gap wide enough to raise its own question: is the shortfall a matter of definition, or a matter of what gets reported upward at all? Even by the ministry's own admission, roughly 30 percent of culverts, 12 percent of minor bridges, 8 percent of major bridges, and 5 percent of the country's extra-long bridges are officially classified as being in "poor condition."

The geography of collapse is not random. Bihar, Uttarakhand, and Himachal Pradesh recorded the highest counts between 2021 and 2025 — 26, 25, and 17 incidents respectively — followed by Gujarat, Jammu and Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Sikkim. These are not uniformly opposition- or ruling-party states; the pattern cuts across political lines, which is itself worth noting for anyone tempted to read this purely as a story about one party's negligence. What is uniform is the funding: these states have not lacked money. Tens of thousands of crores have flowed through toll collections, the Permanent Bridge Fees Fund, and the Central Road and Infrastructure Fund. The bridges kept falling anyway.

Named Failures

A handful of collapses deserve to be named plainly, because abstraction is how infrastructure failure disappears from public memory:

- **Gambhira/Mahisagar Bridge, Gujarat (2025):** A decades-old bridge connecting Anand and Vadodara districts collapsed under monsoon pressure, killing between 18 and 20 people. Reports afterward indicated that state roads-and-buildings officials had been alerted to unusual structural vibrations roughly three years earlier and had not acted.
- **Vikramshila Bridge, Bihar (2026):** A 4.7-kilometre bridge over the Ganga partially collapsed in May. Media reporting indicates warnings about the bridge's condition had circulated as far back as August 2024.
- **Morbi Suspension Bridge, Gujarat (2022):** A century-old bridge collapsed during a public holiday, killing well over a hundred people — the deadliest recent instance and a case where both overcrowding and neglected repair were cited as causes.
- **NH-66 collapse, Kerala (2025):** A roughly 250-metre elevated stretch collapsed at Kooriyad in Malappuram; an expert investigation attributed the failure to design and execution errors that deviated from the highway ministry's own construction standards.

The common thread across nearly all of them is not a single villain but a chain of small, survivable failures — an unfinished drain, a land dispute that delayed slope protection, a warning that sat in a file — that only became lethal once the water arrived.

The Accountability Gap

This is where the story stops being about engineering and becomes a story about governance. Of the collapses examined in one recent analysis, corrective action against the officials or contractors responsible was recorded in only a handful of cases. In most, the cause was written off administratively as "aging and overloading" — a description that closes the file without answering why inspection regimes that exist on paper failed to catch structural decay before it became fatal.

There has been some visible accountability: a review of newly built or newly opened road projects found that lapses across nineteen national highway projects led to the dismissal of eleven officials, with several more disciplined. That is worth stating plainly, because a book arguing for institutional failure loses credibility if it pretends no institutional response exists at all. But eleven dismissals against a backdrop of hundreds of collapses and thousands of pothole-related casualties is a rounding error, not a reckoning. Between 2020 and 2024 alone, India recorded more than 23,000 pothole-related road crashes and close to 9,440 deaths from them — a toll that dwarfs almost any single scandal in this book, and one that rarely makes it past a local news cycle.

Why This Chapter Comes First

It would be easy to open a book like this with a headline financial scandal — a redacted defence contract, a bank write-off measured in the trillions. Those chapters matter, and they follow. But this chapter comes first because potholes and collapsing bridges are corruption's least deniable form. A redacted procurement figure can be argued about in a committee room for years. A bridge that was inaugurated in April and cracked apart in July cannot be explained away in a press briefing. It is corruption you can put your hand on, that ordinary people drive over every day, and that kills without ever appearing in a CAG report at all.

The chapters that follow trace the money. This one simply asks where it went.

Sources and further reading

This chapter draws on infrastructure-failure tracking and analysis published by Newslaundry (2025), the Observer Research Foundation, The Federal, the Free Press Journal, The Diplomat, and Gulf News, alongside the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways' own public disclosures on bridge condition and project dismissals. Figures on pothole-related crashes and fatalities are drawn from road-safety data covering 2020–2024. Specific incident details (Gambhira, Vikramshila, Morbi, NH-66) are drawn from contemporaneous news reporting cited in the text above; primary verification against state PWD inspection records and any available RTI responses is strongly recommended before publication, particularly for claims about prior warnings that were allegedly ignored.

Chapter Two: The Fund That Cares Not to Spend

An Emergency Fund That Doesn't Respond to Emergencies

A fund exists to be spent when the emergency it was built for arrives. That is the entire premise of an emergency fund. By that standard alone, PM CARES has a problem that no amount of legal argument about trust structures can talk around: when floods tore through Assam and Jammu and Kashmir in 2026, killing dozens and displacing hundreds of thousands, the fund built explicitly for national emergencies sat untouched. Not depleted. Not stretched thin by competing demands. Untouched.

This chapter is not an argument that PM CARES is illegal, or that its money has vanished. The evidence for either of those claims is thin, and a book that overstates hands its critics an easy dismissal. The argument that does hold, and holds tightly, is narrower and in some ways more damning: a fund created in a moment of genuine national crisis has quietly become a savings account, opaque by design and answerable to almost no one, while the disasters it exists to answer keep happening without it.

The Numbers

PM CARES closed the 2024–25 financial year with a corpus of ₹8,452 crore, up from ₹7,173 crore the year before. During that year it received more than ₹1,200 crore in fresh donations and interest income. It spent ₹87.85 lakh — a figure worth writing out in full because it is easy to lose in the crores: eighty-seven lakh, eighty-five thousand rupees, against a balance of eight thousand four hundred and fifty-two crore. That is roughly 0.01 percent of the available corpus, spent almost entirely on a single scheme for children affected by the pandemic.

Where is the rest of the money? Roughly 93 percent of it — about ₹7,846 crore — sits in fixed deposits, quietly earning the trust more than ₹400 crore a year in interest. An additional ₹324 crore was refunded to the fund by unnamed "implementing agencies," with no public explanation of what that money had originally been allocated for or why it came back unspent. The audited accounts for two full financial years, 2023–24 and 2024–25, were released together in August 2026, after what several outlets described as a prolonged delay, and without the explanatory notes that normally accompany financial statements of this kind — notes that would ordinarily tell a reader what the numbers actually mean.

Built to Be Unaccountable

None of this opacity is an accident of poor administration. It is structural, and it was structural from the fund's creation in March 2020.

PM CARES is registered as a public charitable trust rather than as part of the government's budgetary accounts. That single design choice does most of the work: because it is legally a private trust, the Prime Minister's Office has consistently maintained that it is not a "public authority" under the Right to Information Act, and RTI requests about its donors, its full expenditure, and its decision-making have been turned away on that basis. It is not audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General, the

constitutional body that audits every other government fund of comparable scale. Instead, it is audited by a private chartered accountant selected by the trust itself. The Supreme Court has upheld this arrangement, ruling that PM CARES is a legitimate, separate charitable trust and declining to order its merger with the older Prime Minister's National Relief Fund — a fund that, unlike PM CARES, has published detailed annual accounts for decades and has been the vehicle for flood and disaster relief since long before 2020.

That legal ruling closes off the argument that PM CARES is unlawful. It does nothing to answer the harder question a reader will still be left with: why does India need a second, opaque emergency fund running in parallel with an older, transparent one — and why, when a real emergency arrives, does the opaque one stay shut?

The Response, On the Record

In fairness, the government's position deserves to be stated plainly rather than paraphrased into a strawman. Its case is threefold: that PM CARES draws on voluntary private donations rather than public money and so is not subject to the same disclosure regime as government funds; that it was designed for broad, fast-moving emergencies rather than the specific disaster categories PMNRF was built around; and that its accounts are in fact audited, just not by the CAG. Each of these claims is true as far as it goes. None of them explains the utilization number. An institution can be legally private and still choose transparency; PM CARES has chosen not to, at exactly the moments when transparency would matter most to the people it was built to help.

Reactions From Across the Spectrum

The criticism here has not come only from the usual opposition benches, which is itself worth noting for a book trying to build a case that will hold up under scrutiny. Transparency researchers have compared the fund's structure directly to the electoral bonds scheme that the Supreme Court itself later struck down, warning that an opaque channel between private donors and a government-linked entity creates exactly the conditions for quiet political favor-trading, whether or not any specific instance can be proven. A hundred former civil servants — retired IAS, IPS, and diplomatic officers with no obvious partisan stake — wrote an open letter as far back as 2021 asking for the same basic disclosure any public trust of this scale should provide as a matter of institutional self-respect. Opposition state leaders have gone further, calling the fund's non-utilization "cruel" against a backdrop of successive disasters — COVID, cyclones, floods in Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Assam, and Jammu and Kashmir — that PM CARES existed, on paper, to address.

Why This Belongs Early in the Book

Chapter One showed corruption you can put your hand on: a bridge, a pothole, a road that cracked within months. This chapter shows corruption you can put your eye on, in a spreadsheet the government itself finally published. There is no redaction here, no alphabetical code standing in for a rupee figure, no committee room argument about commercial confidentiality. The numbers are public, dated, and simple: ₹8,452 crore in,

₹87.85 lakh out. Whatever else this book goes on to argue about opacity in higher-stakes, harder-to-verify corners of Indian governance, this chapter's case rests on arithmetic anyone can check for themselves.

Sources and further reading

This chapter draws on PM CARES' own audited financial statements for FY 2023–24 and FY 2024–25 (released August 2026), and on reporting and analysis from Scroll.in, The Federal, ummid.com, Deccan Herald, the Tribune, Al Jazeera, and counterview.net, along with the Wikipedia entry on PM CARES Fund for background on its 2020 establishment and Supreme Court history. Statements attributed to specific individuals (Anjali Bhardwaj, Priyank Kharge, Mallikarjun Kharge) are drawn from public statements reported in the sources above and should be independently confirmed against primary transcripts or social media posts before direct attribution in the final manuscript.

Chapter Three: The Skill That Wasn't Delivered

An Account Number Called 11111111111

There is a particular kind of corruption that leaves no suitcase of cash and no offshore trail. It lives in a database field, and you can read it yourself in a government audit report: bank account numbers recorded as `11111111111`, `123456`…, single digits, strings of text, names, addresses, special characters — entered into the IT system of India's flagship skilling scheme in place of the accounts into which training rewards were supposed to be paid.

This is the finding, not of an opposition party or an investigative website, but of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, in Report No. 20 of 2025 — a performance audit of the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, the central government's signature effort to answer the question that defines its economic politics: where are the jobs?

What Was Promised

Skill India was announced in 2015 with an ambition scaled to headlines: train hundreds of millions of Indians, bridge the gap between a young population and an employers' market, certify the informal workforce. PMKVY was its flagship instrument across three phases between 2015 and 2022 — short-term training for school and college dropouts, recognition of prior learning for workers already in trades, special projects for targeted sectors. Billions of rupees moved through the National Skill Development Corporation to thousands of private training partners.

The premise was honest enough. The execution, by the government's own auditor's account, was something else.

What the Audit Found

Start with identity, because a skilling scheme that cannot establish who its trainees are cannot establish anything else. Of the 95.9 lakh participants recorded under PMKVY 2.0 and 3.0, the bank-account details field was blank, null, "N/A," or filled with zeros for 90,66,264 of them — **94.53 percent**. Among the remaining candidates whose accounts were recorded, 12,122 unique account numbers were shared by more than 52,000 people. One account number covered 2,106 candidates. And then there were the entries quoted above — the ones that look like someone typing nonsense into a mandatory field.

The ₹500 certification reward each candidate was owed through direct benefit transfer tells the rest of the story: initially processed for barely a quarter of certified candidates, successfully paid to fewer than one in five. By the ministry's own updated figures in October 2024 — two years after the phases closed — more than 34 lakh certified candidates still had not been paid.

Then there is the matter of whether the training happened at all. One unregistered proprietary firm, Neelima Moving Pictures — an "employer" not found to exist when audit went looking in October 2022 — had certified 33,493 people across 21 job roles in eight states in a single year, using photographic evidence that repeated itself across

batches in different states like a wallpaper pattern. When fresher evidence was produced, out of 812 candidates across 24 batches, photographs existed for 694 and Aadhaar details for 132 — with 58 pictures duplicated outright.

The outcomes, finally: of 56.14 lakh candidates certified under short-term training, 23.18 lakh — **41 percent** — were placed. Certification clustered overwhelmingly in a handful of low-barrier trades led by "self-employed tailors," while nineteen other sectors contributed less than one percent of placements each. In an irony worth pausing on, the audit found that four consistently high-placement sectors — plumbing, logistics, healthcare, leather — were simply dropped from PMKVY 3.0. In Assam, sectors that had achieved 84 percent placement under Phase 2 were not considered for Phase 3. The scheme drifted away from exactly the training that worked.

The financial management findings complete the picture: ₹222.63 crore in central funds delayed in transfer and left to burden the Consolidated Fund of India; the National Skill Development Corporation overcharging ₹24.13 crore in administrative expenses and holding back ₹12.16 crore in interest — both recovered only after audit pointed them out.

The Government's Defence, Stated Fairly

Two defences deserve honest treatment. First, the ministry argued that payouts routed to Aadhaar-linked accounts guarantee money reached bona fide candidates. The CAG's answer is precise and devastating: payment into an Aadhaar-linked account does not verify that the person trained ever existed — it verifies only that some account got paid. Second, it will be said that skilling at this scale is genuinely hard, that placement ratios worldwide are modest, that UPA-era skill schemes had parallel problems. All true — and irrelevant to the specific findings here, which concern fabricated records inside a system built to detect fabrication. A hard mission excuses inefficiency. It does not excuse a certification apparatus that could not pass its own identity checks.

Why This Chapter Belongs Here

Chapter One showed failure you can touch. This chapter shows failure you can query — sitting in the ministry's own database, flagged by the government's own auditor. The gap between Skill India's announced ambition and its audited delivery is not a rounding error or a pandemic casualty; it is structural, and it persisted across three phases and nearly a decade. For millions of young Indians told that the answer to unemployment was skills, the state's own records show the skills were often a spreadsheet fiction — while the unemployment rate they were meant to solve kept climbing. The next chapter turns to who pays, in fiscal terms, for the politics built atop that gap.

Sources and further reading

Primary: CAG of India, Report No. 20 of 2025 (Performance Audit — Civil), *Skill Development under Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana*, Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship — all figures cited (94.53 percent missing bank

fields; 12,122 shared account numbers; DBT success rates; 41 percent placement; Neelima Moving Pictures findings; ₹222.63 crore, ₹24.13 crore, ₹12.16 crore items) are drawn directly from the report text. Corroborating coverage: Indian Express, The Wire, ThePrint (all November 2025 reporting on the report's tabling). Recommended before print: pull the CAG PDF and verify each paragraph-level citation; confirm the exact tabling date; obtain the ministry's formal response annexure in full rather than summary form.

Chapter Four: The Vote Priced at Ten Thousand Rupees

The Dashazaari

In the villages of Bihar they have a name for it now — *dashazaari*, the ten-thousand. On September 26, 2025, weeks before the state voted, the Prime Minister appeared by video link from Delhi and transferred ₹10,000 apiece into the bank accounts of 75 lakh women: ₹7,500 crore in a morning, under the Mukhyamantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana, with up to ₹2 lakh more promised after six months. The event had originally been scheduled as a Chief Minister's function. A senior state BJP leader reportedly suggested the Prime Minister's presence would send a stronger message — the election being weeks away.

Nobody involved disputes the arithmetic or the timing. That is precisely what makes this chapter difficult to write in the old grammar of scandal. There is no bag of cash, no midnight seizure. The vote is priced openly, transferred by DBT, receipted by the treasury — and the invoice lands on budgets written years after the polling booths close.

A Pattern With a Calendar

Bihar did not invent this. It perfected a method already proven across the country, and the method has one consistent variable: the distance between the first credit and the election date.

Madhya Pradesh announced Ladli Behna in March 2023 with the November polls in view; payments began months later, anti-incumbency dissolved, and the incumbent BJP's vote share jumped 7.5 points. Karnataka's Congress took office in May 2023 and launched Gruha Lakshmi — ₹2,000 a month to women heads of family — within three months, at a stated outlay of ₹32,000 crore a year. In August 2024, two days before Rakshabandhan, Maharashtra launched Ladki Bahin at ₹1,500 a month for roughly a crore of women — ₹46,000 crore annually — with the Chief Minister publicly linking any increase to electoral support; his alliance won a landslide that October after a bruising Lok Sabha summer. The next day, Jharkhand launched Maiya Samman at ₹1,000 a month; its incumbent coalition returned with a bigger mandate and eight points of added vote share. West Bengal seeded the template in 2021 with Lakshmir Bhandar before its polls; Tamil Nadu, Delhi, Odisha, Haryana followed with variants. One analysis of recent cycles found that whenever such transfers were actually paid out before an assembly election, the incumbent beat anti-incumbency — every time.

Note carefully: this cuts across every party in the book. BJP in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Haryana, Bihar. Congress in Karnataka, Himachal, Telangana's promises. Regional parties in Bengal, Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu. In Bihar both alliances competed openly on price — the NDA's dashazaari and job guarantees against the opposition's promised ₹2,500 monthly stipend and salaried status for Jeevika workers. Any book that frames this as one party's vice is selling you a faction, not a finding.

What the Central Bank Saw Coming

Here is what lifts this beyond campaign commentary: India's Reserve Bank has spent successive annual editions of *State Finances: A Study of Budgets* warning, in increasingly plain language, about exactly this behavior. The 2025-26 edition opens its assessment with the phrase "early signs of vulnerability," lists "growing number of cash-transfer schemes" alongside elevated debt and pay-commission liabilities as mounting risks, notes that several states carry debt above 35 percent of GSDP against the 20 percent benchmark set by the 2018 FRBM review, observes that heavily indebted states are already cutting capital investment to service interest, and calls — tellingly — for a comprehensive database of these schemes because no systematic accounting of them currently exists. In October 2025, with Bihar and Maharashtra spending ahead of elections and state bond yields rising, the central bank publicly cautioned governments against pre-election populism and the Governor urged borrowing restraint.

Read that sequence again: the states spend to win elections; the borrowing costs of the next government rise accordingly; capital expenditure — the roads and schools of Chapter One — gets squeezed to pay interest on the winning bid. The pothole and the dole envelope are the same story told twice.

The Case for the Defence — Taken Seriously

An honest chapter must concede most of the opposing argument. These transfers reach women in an economy where female workforce participation is abysmally low and intra-household money distribution is unequal; surveys in West Bengal found large majorities of recipients reporting improved standing in their own homes. Direct benefit transfer is cleaner than the liquor-and-cash distributions of older elections. The RBI itself concedes such welfare is "essential" in so unequal a country and asks for impact assessment, not abolition.

But notice what the defence cannot supply: a single rigorous state-level evaluation showing these schemes move the outcomes they invoke — employment, nutrition, education — rather than vote shares. Jharkhand announced Maiya Samman without a published budgetary allocation. Maharashtra's costing doubled in political rhetoric between launch and polling day. Schemes calibrated to election calendars are, definitionally, calibrated to something other than five-year fiscal plans. The problem is not that a poor woman received ₹1,500. The problem is that the sum was set by an election date, financed by borrowing whose costs compound silently, evaluated by nobody, and priced — as Bihar's own nickname for it admits — at ten thousand rupees per voter.

That is the transaction this book keeps returning to: public money converted into electoral certainty, with the audit trail running backward only as far as the polling date.

Sources and further reading

Primary: RBI, *State Finances: A Study of Budgets 2025-26* (October 2025) — vulnerability assessment, debt-GSDP figures, FRBM 2018 benchmark, cash-transfer risk language, DBT-database recommendation; PIB release dated September 25, 2025 on the Mukhyamantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana launch (₹10,000 × 75 lakh women; ₹7,500 crore; ₹2 lakh second phase). Secondary: The Hindu (scheme launches and Bihar election coverage, including the "Dashazaari"/women-voter reporting and the September 26 launch), Mint (October 27, 2025, RBI caution on Bihar/Maharashtra), The Quint (election-cycle transfer analysis), Business Standard (NDA Bihar manifesto), Hindu BusinessLine (cross-state scheme comparison). Before print: verify the reported claim that the September 22 original schedule featured only the Chief Minister — this rests on a single newspaper attribution and should be confirmed or softened; obtain current beneficiary counts and actual disbursals for Ladki Bahin, Gruha Lakshmi, and Maiya Samman from state budget documents; locate any post-launch impact evaluations, and state explicitly in text if none exist.

Chapter Five: Debt, Rupee, and the Growth Story

The Number That Announces Itself

In February 2026, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation released the most consequential set of economic numbers the Indian state produces: an entirely rebuilt national accounts series, rebased from the exhausted 2011-12 base year to 2022-23. At its centre sat a figure that travelled instantly into headlines and speeches — real GDP growth of 7.6 per cent for the financial year, up from the 7.4 per cent the old series had projected weeks earlier, riding on quarters of 8.4 and 7.8 per cent growth. By any comparator that matters, India was once again the fastest-growing major economy on Earth.

This chapter takes that number seriously, which is precisely why it refuses to take it on faith. The claim examined here is not that India's growth is fictional. It is real, and in parts remarkable. The question is narrower and harder: what does the headline number rest on, whose labour produced it, who carries its costs — and how much of the distance between the celebratory headline and the lived economy is explained by the machinery of measurement itself?

Because in India, uniquely among large economies, that machinery has spent a decade being adjusted at moments of political inconvenience, by institutions whose independence was tested in plain sight. And the ledger beneath the headline — the debt that finances it, the currency that prices it, the household books that quietly absorb its imbalances — tells a story the headline cannot.

How to Weigh Seven Point Six

Begin with the rebasing itself, because it is legitimate and necessary. Base years are supposed to change; economies restructure, and a statistical system measuring today's economy with last decade's weights is lying by omission. MoSPI's new series incorporates genuine improvements: supply-and-use tables that reconcile production with spending, and a deflator universe expanded from roughly 180 price indices to over 600. The ministry's secretary, Saurabh Garg, told journalists the changes would capture structural shifts the old series missed. He is probably right.

But rebasing does something else, and it must be said plainly: it changed the past. Growth for 2024-25, reported at 6.5 per cent under the outgoing series, became 7.1 per cent under the new one. Nothing new happened in the economy between those two publications. The denominator moved, and history improved. An associate at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress put the mechanism honestly to ThePrint: the increase "reflects redistribution across components, rather than a broad acceleration."

Now layer in the problem statisticians call, with unintended poetry, *discrepancies*. GDP can be measured from the production side — what India makes — or the expenditure side — what India spends. In a well-measured economy these converge. In India, MoSPI carries an actual budget line for the gap between them. That gap grew 230 per cent in a single year to roughly ₹3.5 lakh crore for FY2024-25, and is pegged at ₹4.9 lakh crore for FY2025-26 — sums approaching the entire Union capital budget, vanishing into a

reconciliation account. Pronab Sen, a former chief statistician of India, traced the cause to what happens as you move away from the base year: price data degrades, deflators sour, and the real-growth number inherits the error. It is the same deflator problem that led the country's own former Chief Economic Adviser, Arvind Subramanian, to argue in 2019 that the previous series had overstated growth — a conclusion he reached while serving the government he was critiquing.

Here is where this stops being a seminar dispute. In November 2025, the International Monetary Fund concluded its Article IV consultation with India — the annual health check conducted on every member economy — and its executive directors recorded a sentence that deserves to be read twice: they encouraged the authorities to *review their medium-term debt target in light of the GDP rebasing next year, with a view to making it more ambitious*. Decode the diplomatic grammar: when the denominator grows on paper, every ratio computed against it improves automatically. Debt-to-GDP falls without a rupee of debt being repaid. The Fund was publicly warning the government not to let its own statistical revision do its fiscal consolidation for it.

When international lenders begin offering advice about how not to be flattered by your own arithmetic, the arithmetic has stopped being boring.

A Short History of Inconvenient Numbers

The rebasing of 2026 did not occur in a vacuum. It occurred in a statistical ecosystem whose recent history includes the following sequence, each element documented at the time in the business press:

In November 2018, a committee's reconstruction of GDP growth for past decades — the "back series" — was released not by the statistical system but by NITI Aayog, the government's policy think tank, bypassing the National Statistical Commission, the apex statutory body meant to certify exactly such releases. The exercise cut the peak growth year of the previous government, 2010-11, from 10.3 per cent down to 8.5 per cent. The Commission's own version of the back series — which had been more favourable to the previous government — was disowned. Former officials confirmed to The Indian Express that an earlier official back series showing *higher* UPA-era growth had been finalized by the Central Statistics Office and never permitted release.

Weeks later, in January 2019, it emerged that the National Sample Survey Office's employment survey for 2017-18 — the first comprehensive jobs measurement covering the demonetisation period — had been approved by the Statistical Commission on December 5, 2018, and then withheld. Its leaked finding: an unemployment rate above 6 per cent, the highest in forty-five years. NITI Aayog's vice-chairman publicly called the approved report a "draft." The Commission's acting chairman, P.C. Mohanan, rebutted him directly — it was final, it needed no further approval — and, with his fellow member J.V. Meenakshi, resigned in protest. The survey was eventually made public only after the 2019 general election results were declared.

Fairness requires three concessions. First, every government in living memory has preferred flattering statistics; the UPA years had their own controversies, and the old series' inflation of pre-2011 growth was itself a distortion the back-series partially

corrected. Second, there are genuine technical arguments for each contested change — survey redesigns, data-source upgrades, the calendar-year restructuring of the labour survey from January 2025, which improves timeliness even as it breaks comparability with everything before it. Third, no specific revision documented above has been proven in court or by regulator to have been directed toward a political outcome, and this book does not allege that it was.

But step back from individual decisions and observe the pattern, which is the thing a book about institutional failure is obliged to observe: over a decade, on every occasion when a headline statistic turned politically adverse, the instrument measuring it was redesigned, delayed, re-based, or re-authorised before the next reading. One instance is misfortune. A sequence is a system. And a democracy that cannot trust its own census of reality will eventually make fiscal policy — borrowing, spending, rate-setting — against a mirror.

The costs of that are not abstract. They arrive in the next sections, denominated in rupees.

Three Point One Per Cent, Read Slowly

The official unemployment rate for 2025, under the revamped Periodic Labour Force Survey, is 3.1 per cent — presented in Parliament as evidence of a labour market in enviable health, down from 3.6 per cent in 2022. The figure is not fabricated; it is a truthful answer to the question the survey technically asks. The trouble is what the question misses, and the same survey's own deeper pages reveal it.

Start with the gradient that appears when you slice the 3.1 per cent by education, from the government's own reply in the Lok Sabha: among illiterate workers, unemployment is 0.3 per cent. Among those with secondary education or higher, it is 6.5 per cent. The poorest Indians cannot afford the luxury of being unemployed; they take any work at any wage, and are counted as employed. Joblessness in India is overwhelmingly a phenomenon of the schooled — the very cohort every skilling scheme, including the one dissected in Chapter Three, was built to absorb. The International Labour Organization's landmark India Employment Report 2024, prepared with the Institute for Human Development, quantified the skew: young people constitute almost 83 per cent of India's unemployed workforce, and among graduate youth the unemployment rate reached 29.1 per cent in 2022 — nine times the rate for those who cannot read.

Then read what happened to the rest of the survey's own denominators. One in four Indians aged 15 to 29 — and one in five aged 15 to 24 — is counted as neither in employment, education, nor training: the statisticians' acronym is NEET, and the population it describes runs into the tens of millions, disproportionately female. Women's workforce participation, celebrated for rising toward 40 per cent, is dominated by self-employment status — the survey's own hours data show urban self-employed men working seventeen more hours per week than their female counterparts, a measure of how much "employment" at the margin consists of marginal work. Over half of all employed Indians — 56.2 per cent in 2025 — are self-employed, the classification that absorbs those whom the organised economy declines to hire. And in a finding that belongs beside Chapter Three's audit of the skill ministry, the same labour survey found

that just **4.2 per cent** of Indians aged 15 to 59 had ever received formal vocational or technical training. The state announced skilling for hundreds of millions. Four in a hundred received it, and the auditor found much of even that to be fiction.

None of this appears in the 3.1. It doesn't need to hide. Usual-status measurement simply defines it out of the frame.

The Twenty-Five-Paise Government

Now follow the money that finances the growth story, because it is borrowed.

India's general government debt — the Centre plus the states — stood at 81.6 per cent of GDP in 2024-25, per the IMF's Article IV tables, and is projected to remain above 80 per cent through the current financial year: among the highest ratios of any major emerging economy, and far above the trajectories of the East Asian economies India benchmarks itself against. The combined deficit runs near 8 per cent of GDP. Against this, the government's stated target of bringing central debt to 50±1 per cent by 2030-31 is assessed by the Fund as achievable — and, in the sentence quoted earlier, as insufficiently ambitious even so. Under shock scenarios, the Fund's staff note, India's debt paths are "skewed towards elevated debt levels." The sovereign-stress rating is moderate. The buffer is thin.

What does the debt buy? Increasingly, it buys itself. Union interest payments in the 2025-26 budget were set at ₹12.76 lakh crore — twenty-five paise of every rupee the government spends, extracted before one bridge is built, one vaccine purchased, one salary paid. That interest bill equals roughly 37 per cent of all revenue receipts. Set it against the Union's capital expenditure — ₹11.21 lakh crore, the celebrated infrastructure push of Chapter One — and the comparison lands with physical force: **the government now pays more each year to service old debt than to construct new assets.** The roads-and-rivers narrative and the fiscal ledger tell the same story from opposite ends: the monsoon audits the bridges; the interest bill audits the borrowings; both find the same deferred accounts.

Add the inherited accounting habits: for years before 2021, food-subsidy costs were kept off the Union's books entirely through Food Corporation borrowing, inflating the apparent deficit path until an accounting correction absorbed them. Add Chapter Four's election-calibrated state largesse, which the Reserve Bank has flagged as a mounting fiscal risk in successive editions of its State Finances study. The debt did not accumulate through any single decision. It accumulated the way silt does — each deposit defensible, the river rising anyway.

To the government's credit, the mitigants are real and this book states them plainly: India's debt is overwhelmingly rupee-denominated, held domestically, with long maturities — no European-style maturity cliff exists. Tax collections have been buoyant. Consolidation is genuinely underway, with the central deficit guided down toward 4.4 per cent. But consolidation at 4.4 per cent of GDP still adds to the stock; a deficit is not a repayment. And the Fund's observation that India's revenue-to-GDP ratio is *not high* compared with peer economies explains the trap in one clause: a state that collects little

cannot grow out of its debt, because growth does not reach the exchequer fast enough to outrun the interest.

A Currency and Its Sponsor

If debt is the growth story's mortgage, the exchange rate is its credit score — and in 2025 the score was tested.

On September 29, 2025, the rupee touched its weakest level ever recorded, 88.80 to the dollar. Through October and early November, the Reserve Bank of India fought a visible rearguard action: state-run banks offering dollars at the line, the central bank active simultaneously in the onshore and offshore markets, traders describing the defence to Reuters in operational detail. On November 21, the line broke. The rupee slid to a lifetime low of 89.49, its steepest single-day fall in months, as portfolio outflows — some $17 billion pulled from Indian equities that year — met the uncertainty of 50 per cent American tariffs imposed in late August, and the central bank, traders judged, deliberately stood aside before stepping back in near 89.50.

Zoom out and the frame comes into focus. When this government first took office in 2014, the dollar cost about ₹60. At the November 2025 record low it cost ₹89.49 — the rupee surrendering roughly a third of its external value across the period. Depreciation of a few per cent annually against the world's reserve currency is neither scandal nor surprise; it is the arithmetic of an economy growing faster than its trading partners while importing its energy. What distinguishes India's version is its management — and its management has a sponsor, a budget, and beneficiaries.

Consider what the Reserve Bank itself disclosed. Between December 2024 and August 2025, the bank spent a net $43.5 billion from the reserves defending the rupee in the spot market. Its forward book swung from a net short position of $88.75 billion in February 2025 to $53.36 billion by August — a quiet liquidation of commitments worth lakhs of crores, executed off the spot market's books. When spot intervention grew expensive, the bank shifted operations into the non-deliverable offshore market, which achieves the smoothing without touching the reserves at all. The result, visible in Reuters' reporting through the episode, is a currency engineered for low day-to-day volatility and relentless directional drift — the financial equivalent of a staircase dressed as a ramp.

And consider who the stability serves. Importers — the corporates buying oil, electronics, gold — hedged an average of $43 billion a month through 2025, up 32 per cent on the pre-existing average, while exporters added only 11 per cent, leaving a hedging gulf that Reuters described as heightening the currency's reliance on the central bank. Translate: private actors increasingly outsource their foreign-exchange risk to the public balance sheet. The gains of a predictably cheap, predictably smooth rupee accrue privately; the cost of providing it — reserve draw-downs, forward exposures, the suppressed pass-through to export competitiveness — is socialised onto the Reserve Bank's books, which is to say, onto the citizenry's. Meanwhile the reserves that make the defence possible performed their own drama: an all-time high of $728.5 billion in late February 2026, drained through weeks of dollar sales when a Middle East conflict

erupted, then painstakingly rebuilt to $716.9 billion by mid-August 2026. The fortress is impressive. A fortress that must be rebuilt after every siege is also a running cost.

None of this is illegal, and little of it is secret — the Reserve Bank publishes enough for the diligent to reconstruct. That is precisely what makes it instructive for this book. Here is a case where the "corruption" is not a bag of cash but a structure: a transfer of risk from parties who earned their exposure to a public that was never consulted, executed with impeccable professionalism, invisible unless someone reads the footnotes. Chapter Two's fund hid behind trust law. Chapter Five's currency hides behind volatility targeting. The technique evolves; the architecture of unaccountability rhymes.

The Household Ledger

There is one more set of books, kept not by governments but by families, and it has been deteriorating longest.

Net household financial savings — what Indian families save in deposits, shares, insurance, minus what they borrow — collapsed to around 5 per cent of GDP in 2022-23, its lowest level in roughly four to five decades by the Reserve Bank's own data, down from a pre-pandemic norm of 7 to 8 per cent. The recovery since has been partial and, crucially, financed: household borrowing surged to 6.4 per cent of GDP in 2023-24, the highest in seventeen years, with unsecured personal loans — consumption credit, not home or business credit — rising fastest by independent economists' estimates. Total household debt now stands near 43 per cent of GDP by private calculations, against roughly 32 per cent a decade ago. Families did not suddenly become thriftier. They borrowed to hold their standard of living still while the ground moved.

What the aggregate consumed, the distribution reveals. The automobile market — capitalism's most honest opinion about the middle class — split into two non-communicating economies. In FY2016, Indians bought 934,538 cars priced under ₹5 lakh, the classic first-rung purchase of an aspiring household. In FY2025, they bought **25,402**. The Maruti Alto, once the country's best-selling car, sold fewer than 6,000 units in June 2025 across its entire family of models — while the ₹11-lakh-plus Hyundai Creta became the nation's top seller, flanked by utility vehicles that together accounted for nearly 70 per cent of the market, hatchbacks sinking to a record-low quarter share. The industry's own president, Shailesh Chandra of SIAM, named it at a press briefing: "clear stress in the entry-level segment… a tale of two markets." Consumer-research data cited by carmakers showed vehicle ownership *falling* among households earning under ₹4 lakh a year — the brackets containing roughly four-fifths of all Indian homes. Fast-moving consumer goods told the same story in gentler language: premium products driving all the value growth while mass-market volumes stayed muted. Two-wheeler sales — the truest barometer of the lower-middle household — contracted 6.2 per cent in the June 2025 quarter, the first decline in four years.

This is what a K-shaped recovery looks like when drawn in sales receipts: the upper arm rising on SUVs, sunroofs, and premiumisation; the lower arm descending through mopeds, hatchbacks, and entry-level extinction. Aggregate GDP growth of 7.6 per cent is fully compatible with this picture, because averages do not live in households. The growth is real. Its incidence is narrow. And the gap between the two is being bridged,

increasingly, by household debt — the quietest lender of last resort in the economy, and the only one whose collateral is the family itself.

The Defence, Taken Seriously

An honest chapter must now argue against itself, and the case for the defence is substantial — stronger, in places, than in any preceding chapter of this book.

It begins with the headline, because the headline is true. India has grown faster than every other large economy through a period that included a pandemic, a global rate shock, and a trade war targeted specifically at it. Services exports have boomed into structural strength. The digital public infrastructure stack — unified payments processing billions of transactions monthly at negligible cost — is a genuine administrative revolution, whatever one thinks of its architects. Formalisation metrics have moved: income-tax rolls have widened dramatically, goods-and-services tax collections compound annually, and the Union's capital expenditure, at over ₹11 lakh crore a year, is multiples of anything the previous decade attempted. The Reserve Bank's handling of the rupee episode — smoothing without crisis, rebuilding reserves within months — was competent stewardship by any global standard. The IMF projects 6-plus per cent growth continuing while peer emerging markets grind at half that. Nations would commit crimes for this record. Some allegedly have; this book is about whether ours did.

The defence continues with symmetry: every statistical sin catalogued above had precedents under predecessor governments, and several of the current system's improvements — the transparent discrepancy disclosure, the expanded deflator set, the faster labour survey — are real reforms a critic must square with.

All of this is granted. And none of it answers the charge. Because the charge was never "the economy failed." The charge is that the gap between the announced economy and the audited one — jobs versus headline growth, household books versus national ones, the rupee's smoothness versus its slide — is widest exactly where measurement is least independent, and that the institutions responsible for closing that gap have repeatedly been bent at the moment of truth. A government confident in its transformation does not need the unemployment survey withheld before an election, the back-series routed through a political think tank, or the Fund gently warning it not to celebrate its own rebasing. The competent management and the managed statistics are the same story: an administration superb at operating machinery, and uneasy whenever that machinery reports something back.

Why This Chapter Belongs Here

The first three chapters of this book followed failures outward — a road that cracked, a fund that would not spend, a skilling database full of ones. This chapter follows them inward, to the place where they are financed and rationalised. The bridges of Chapter One compete with an interest bill that now exceeds the capital budget. The vote-buying schemes of Chapter Four draw on state balance sheets the Reserve Bank has formally flagged. The skilling fiction of Chapter Three floats atop a labour market whose official 3.1 per cent conceals one in four young people outside work and study altogether. And

the whole edifice is narrated by statistics produced by institutions whose independence was publicly contested by their own resigned guardians.

That is the connection this book exists to draw. Corruption is usually imagined as money moving where it shouldn't. Its mature form is subtler: money moving exactly where it should — into roads, schemes, reserves — while the systems that would verify whether it arrived are quietly repointed, so that every future question answers itself favourably. A republic can survive broken bridges. It cannot indefinitely survive broken instruments for seeing, because every repair, every scheme, every rupee of the growth story depends on knowing where the cracks actually are.

The next chapter examines the people constitutionally charged with asking that question on the citizen's behalf — the five hundred and forty-three members of the Lok Sabha — and what the verified record shows about who, precisely, they turned out to be.

Sources and further reading

Primary documents: MoSPI Press Note on the New Series of National Accounts with Base Year 2022-23 (Second Advance Estimates, February 2026) — FY26 real growth 7.6%, nominal 8.6%, FY25 restated to 7.1%; MoSPI Press Note, PLFS Annual Report 2025 (calendar-year 2025, first report under the January-2025 methodology revamp) — unemployment, LFPR, self-employment, NEET, and vocational-training figures; Ministry of Labour & Employment, Lok Sabha Unstarred Question AU2341 — unemployment rates by education level; IMF Country Report No. 25/314, *India: 2025 Article IV Consultation* (November 2025) — general-government debt and deficit series, the executive-board language on reviewing the debt target "in light of the GDP rebasing," shock-scenario debt paths, revenue-to-GDP assessment; PRS Legislative Research, *Union Budget 2025-26 Analysis*, and Observer Research Foundation budget review — interest payments of ₹12.76 lakh crore (25% of expenditure, ~37% of revenue receipts), capex ₹11.21 lakh crore; RBI National Summary Data Page (August 2026) and RBI Bulletin forward-position disclosures (as reported by Moneycontrol) — reserves trajectory, $43.47 billion net spot intervention December 2024–August 2025, forward-book swing from $88.75 billion to $53.36 billion; ILO/Institute for Human Development, *India Employment Report 2024* — youth share of the unemployed (~83%), graduate unemployment (29.1%), NEET gender splits; Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers quarterly dispatches (April–June 2025) and entry-segment sales data as compiled by The Indian Express.

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market and PRICE consumer-penetration data; RBI December 2024 Bulletin / Motilal Oswal, ICRA, and Hindu BusinessLine analyses of household financial savings and debt.

Before print — verification flags: (1) All Union-budget figures cited are Budget Estimates for 2025-26; update against the Union Budget 2026-27 documents presented in February 2026, which postdate the reporting relied on here. (2) Confirm the exact publication date of the withheld PLFS 2017-18 survey (reported as May 31, 2019) against the MoSPI archive. (3) Household-savings sources differ on whether the FY23 trough was a 43- or 47-year low; the text says "four to five decades" pending reconciliation against the RBI's original bulletin table. (4) The FY25 growth restatement (6.5% → 7.1%) should be verified against both the old-series Second Revised Estimates and the new-series First Revised Estimates side by side. (5) Statements attributed to named individuals (Garg, Sen, Gupta, Chandra, Mohanan, Kumar) are drawn from the interviews and press conferences cited and should be checked against transcripts before direct quotation.

Chapter Six: Who Sits in Parliament

The Myth That Flatters Them

Every democracy keeps a caricature of its rulers, and India's is well-worn: the illiterate politician, the village strongman stumbling through parliament, governing a nuclear power from beneath a white cap he cannot read under. The caricature does useful work. If our lawmakers are ignorant, their failures are innocent — errors of comprehension rather than choices of convenience. No inquiry required; they simply didn't know better.

It is also, on the evidence, false. And its falsity was measured with total precision in June 2024, when the Association for Democratic Reforms finished tabulating the self-sworn educational affidavits of all 543 winners of the eighteenth Lok Sabha. There was not one illiterate member. All 121 candidates who declared themselves illiterate lost. Of the winners, 147 hold graduate degrees, another 147 hold postgraduate degrees, 98 hold professional degrees, 28 hold doctorates — five per cent of the house carrying research qualifications, a rate exceeding most national civil services. Seventy-eight per cent completed at least undergraduate education; only a single member, of the Janata Dal (United), declared himself merely literate. Whatever else changed in 2024, the country did not elect ignoramuses.

This chapter takes that correction seriously, because it makes the verifiable picture worse, not better. These are not people who lack the capacity to understand what a pothole audit means, what an idle emergency fund signifies, what a falsified skilling database implies. They are, in aggregate, educated, extraordinarily wealthy, and — in nearly half of cases under oath — accused before the criminal courts. The question this chapter pursues is not whether India's legislature is staffed by fools. It is why a democratic system staffed by the credentialed and the affluent keeps producing the outcomes catalogued in the preceding five chapters, and why every attempt to change the composition of the house has died inside it.

The fear is old. Writing in his prison diary in 1922, twenty-five years before independence, C. Rajagopalachari predicted it with unbearable accuracy: *"Elections and their corruption, injustice and tyranny of wealth, and inefficiency of administration, will make a hell of life as soon as freedom is given to us."* The republic's own documents have been confirming him for three decades now.

What Two Decades of Sworn Paper Show

India possesses, uniquely among major democracies, a machine for photographing its political class twice a decade: the election affidavit. Born of the Supreme Court's 2002 ruling in *Union of India v. Association for Democratic Reforms* — which located a voter's right to know a candidate's antecedents inside the freedom of speech — and codified into the Representation of the People Act soon after, the regime requires every candidate to swear, before nomination papers are accepted, to their criminal charges, their assets, their education. It is one of Indian democracy's genuine institutional achievements, and this book honours it: there are governments of long-established democracies that would not tolerate this mirror.

The mirror has now accumulated four reflections of the Lok Sabha, and read in sequence it tells a story with a single directional arrow.

In 2009, 162 of 543 winning candidates — thirty per cent — declared criminal cases pending against them. In 2014, 185 (34 per cent). In 2019, 233 (43 per cent). In 2024, **251 — forty-six per cent**, the highest proportion in the house's history under the disclosure regime. The serious subset — charges of murder, attempted murder, rape, kidnapping, crimes against women — climbed faster still: seventy-six members in 2009, 112 in 2014, 159 in 2019, 170 in 2024. That is a 124 per cent increase in legislators facing grave charges across fifteen years, in a house whose median member holds a university degree.

The financial column moved the same way, further and faster. In 2009, 58 per cent of winners were crorepatis. By 2024 it was **504 of 543 — ninety-three per cent** — with average declared assets of ₹46.34 crore per member. The richest, a first-time TDP MP who became a union minister of state, declared ₹5,705 crore; the second richest, of the BJP, ₹4,568 crore. Party made no discernible difference: 95 per cent of BJP's winners were crorepatis, 93 per cent of Congress's, 100 per cent of the JDU's and TDP's, 92 per cent of the SP's. The house that debates poverty quotas is drawn almost entirely from the wealthiest two-thousandths of the population it legislates for — the average member's declared assets standing somewhere north of nine thousand times the average Indian household's annual consumption.

Two caveats belong beside these figures, and honesty requires them in the text rather than a footnote. First, a criminal charge is not a crime; the presumption of innocence binds, and this book will defend that principle against its own argument shortly. Second, affidavit data is self-reported, imperfectly verified, and occasionally inflated or deflated for tactical reasons. But neither caveat touches the trend line, which runs in one direction across four elections, six parties' banners, and every region of the country. Something systemic is being measured here, and it is not weather.

The Market Logic of the Ticket

Here is the finding around which the rest of the chapter organizes itself, because it converts scandal into arithmetic: **candidates with declared criminal cases won 15.3 per cent of the seats they contested in 2024. Candidates with clean records won 4.4 per cent.** Candidates worth over a crore won 19.6 per cent of their contests; candidates worth less won 0.7 per cent. The accused candidate's odds were three and a half times better than the clean one's; the rich candidate's odds were twenty-eight times better.

Sit in the chair of a party strategist for a moment — any party, because the data is uniform across them — and the incentive structure resolves itself without cruelty or conspiracy. Tickets are the scarcest commodity the party distributes. Every ticket allocated to a likely loser wastes a constituency. The affidavits tell you, with statistical bluntness, who wins: the wealthy and the charged. Money funds the campaign machinery that public funding ceilings make indispensable; local dominance — sometimes economic, sometimes muscular, usually both — delivers booths. The strategist does not need to admire the accused candidate. He needs to win the seat, and

the data says the accused candidate is his best available instrument. The Law Commission put the same observation in drier language in 2014: candidates with criminal cases fare *better* at elections than clean ones, are therefore renominated, and untainted legislators subsequently acquire entanglements of their own. The filter selects for what it rewards.

Notice what this shares with Chapter Four. There, the vote was purchased retail — ten thousand rupees into a bank account weeks before polling. Here we see the wholesale side of the identical transaction: crores spent to obtain the authority that dispenses such transfers, recovered later through the mechanisms every other chapter of this book documents. The voter receives a cash incentive to re-elect; the candidate calculates a return on acquisition. Between them stands a legislature whose composition guarantees that no majority exists to interrupt the exchange — because interrupting it is against the financial interest of nearly everyone seated.

And the composition compounds. Fifty-one per cent of sitting state MLAs — 2,098 of 4,111 — declare criminal cases, 1,286 of them serious. Three-quarters of the way through the amicus curiae's survey of chief ministers, fourteen of the country's twenty-eight had declared criminal cases against themselves, in at least one case numbering eighty-nine. This is not a fringe phenomenon infecting an otherwise healthy body. It is the body.

Lily Thomas, and How a Victory Was Digested

Parliament's defenders will say — accurately — that the law already disqualifies convicted legislators, and more strictly than before. The stricter law exists because of a retired tax officer named Lily Thomas, whose petition the Supreme Court granted on July 10, 2013. Section 8(4) of the Representation of the People Act had carved sitting legislators out of the ordinary rule: a convicted lawmaker could keep the seat for three months and indefinitely longer, provided an appeal was filed — a protection no ordinary convict enjoyed, and which had kept convicted legislators voting on the laws that governed their own prosecutions. Justices A.K. Patnaik and S.J. Mukhopadhaya struck the provision down as beyond Parliament's competence: the Constitution, they held, does not permit the legislature to defer the vacancy its own members' convictions create. Disqualification would now operate from the date of conviction, appeal or no appeal. Editorialists called it the single most important anti-corruption verdict in a generation.

What followed deserves study, because it is the master class in how the Indian state digests inconvenient rulings. Within months, convicted legislators' appeals reached the High Courts and Supreme Courts — where the new remedy revealed itself. An appeal against *conviction* may be admitted and the conviction *stayed*, restoring eligibility mid-trial, and stays began arriving with remarkable promptness. The Supreme Court itself grew concerned enough to standardize the practice in December 2020, laying down criteria for when a conviction may properly be stayed — implicitly acknowledging that the exception had begun operating as the rule. Meanwhile the deeper bottleneck stayed untouched: a conviction requires a completed trial, and the trials of legislators simply do not complete.

Consider the scale of the non-completion, from the record assembled before the Supreme Court in the special-courts proceedings initiated in 2017. In March 2014,

acting on a public-interest petition, the Court directed that trials against MPs and MLAs be concluded **within one year of charges being framed**. The direction was never operationalized. In November 2017 the Court ordered twelve special courts across eleven states to exclusively try the 1,581 cases declared by the 2014 cohort of legislators. Eight years later, the Court's own amicus curiae reported back: more than 4,000 cases against sitting and former MPs and MLAs remained pending — a count that had *grown* since the monitoring began (4,075 in December 2018; 4,192 in his January 2025 compilation, with ADR's parallel tabulation placing it near 4,700, over five hundred of them pending more than a decade). Cases of murder pending twenty-five years. Attempted murder twenty-three. Robbery twenty-four. The one-year deadline of 2014 is now old enough to drive past its own crime scenes.

And the outcome of this entire apparatus, across seventeen years of affidavit tabulation covering 4,807 elected MPs and MLAs? Twenty-four declared convictions. Half of one per cent. The machine that convicts 60-plus per cent of ordinary defendants brought to trial — slowly — convicts their legislators at a rate indistinguishable from zero. Whatever else explains that number, it is not the probity of the population being measured, because the same population's own affidavits concede hundreds of charges framed, chargesheets filed, witnesses examined. The honest reading is simpler: the criminal justice system, applied to the people who command it, performs like every other institution in this book. The bridge inspector does not inspect his own bridge. The prosecutor does not conclude the case that could unseat the government's majority partner. Justice delayed is not merely justice denied; in this configuration, delay is the product. It is what the fee buys.

The Reform Graveyard

The Indian state has diagnosed this disease with unusual clarity and unusual repetition. The Vohra Committee — appointed after the 1993 Mumbai blasts exposed the underworld's reach into administration — reported that criminal networks had developed an elaborate nexus with bureaucrats, politicians, and media, and urged systematic surveillance of the criminally entrenched in public life. Its recommendations went nowhere. The National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution reported in 2002 that criminals were no longer financing politicians but *becoming* them, directly. Nowhere. In February 2014, pursuant to a Supreme Court reference, the Law Commission delivered its 244th Report, whose central conclusion deserves quotation because it remains the most precise sentence written on the subject: *"Disqualification upon conviction has proved to be incapable of curbing the growing criminalisation of politics, owing to long delays in trials and rare convictions."* The Commission recommended disqualification at the stage of judicial framing of charges — for offences punishable with five years or more, shielded by safeguards: a one-year window before nominations to weed out freshly foisted cases, disqualification capped at six years absent acquittal, mandatory day-to-day trials concluded within a year for sitting legislators, failing which their voting rights and perquisites would stand suspended. A careful, calibrated, constitutionally literate proposal. It has now waited longer than a Rajya Sabha term for Parliament to act, through governments of every alignment, and none has introduced it.

Then came September 25, 2018. A five-judge Constitution Bench — the strongest formation below eleven — took up the question directly in *Public Interest Foundation v. Union of India*. The petitioners asked the Court to bar charge-framed candidates from contesting. The Bench declined: creating new disqualifications, it held, is Parliament's exclusive province, and judges may not legislate — a holding this book respects even as it notes what came next. But the Chief Justice's language abandoned the usual judicial register. Criminalization of politics, the Court said, was "extremely disastrous." Citizens could not be compelled to stand "as silent, deaf and mute spectators to corruption." The directions were issued, the Bench recorded, *"with immense anguish"* — and Parliament was told, in terms, to enact a strong law requiring parties to revoke the membership of the charge-framed and refuse them tickets. False cases against politicians, the Court observed, could be addressed by the same legislation. The door was left open, the key described in detail.

What Parliament heard was only the part about not being ordered to act. In the interim, the Bench had prescribed the least intrusive remedy available: publicity. Candidates must disclose charges to the Election Commission in block letters; parties must publish them on their websites; both must advertise them in widely circulated newspapers and on television **three separate times** during the campaign. The Election Commission dutifully built the machinery — formats, font sizes, deadlines, television windows ending forty-eight hours before polls closed. At the next general election, in 2019, ADR checked whether the orders were being obeyed during the very first phase of polling. Its finding: **every political party examined had violated the Supreme Court's directions** — websites bare, newspapers unadvertised, television slots unaired. In Kerala, the Chief Electoral Officer formally noticed five parties, including a ruling party at state level, for silence; only a handful of parties anywhere responded to compliance queries, and the officer observed publicly that the dereliction could attract proceedings for contempt of court. Nothing of consequence followed. The publicity mandate — the mildest accountability instrument ever designed, costing nothing but candour — was defied openly, simultaneously, and without visible penalty by the entire spectrum. It has been partially honoured in some subsequent cycles, sporadically enforced, and never made a statutory duty, because making it one is the job of the house it would illuminate.

Lay the graveyard out in sequence and read the pattern, because it is this book's thesis rendered in institutional form. 1993: diagnosis, no action. 2002: rediagnosis, no action. 2013: a judicial fix, digested within eighteen months through appellate procedure. 2014: a legislative blueprint, shelved permanently. 2017: special courts, backlog grows. 2018: a constitutional bench's anguish converted into a publicity order, defied universally within seven months. Each intervention failed at the exact point where it required the consent or compliance of the legislature itself. The Vohra Committee's "nexus" language suggests conspirators coordinating in the dark. What the record actually documents is worse and more lawful: open, competing, multi-party convergence on inaction, each actor behaving rationally inside the incentive structure the last section described. Nobody had to conspire. Nobody had to break anything. The gate simply opens inward, and everyone inside agrees, without a meeting, that it stays shut.

The Defence, Taken Seriously

An honest chapter must now argue against itself, and here the defence is genuinely formidable — the strongest of any chapter so far — because it rests on principles this book elsewhere insists upon.

Begin with presumption of innocence, the foundation of the entire criminal justice system. Forty-six per cent accused does not mean forty-six per cent guilty; the affidavit counts *charges*, and charges in India are cheaply filed. Governments of every party weaponize police machinery against opponents; a quarter-century of politically motivated prosecution has taught every opposition leader the defensive value of a pending case, and some fraction — nobody can say how large — of the 251 are victims of exactly that. The defence adds, correctly, that the conviction data cuts both ways: if trials concluded tomorrow, acquittals would plausibly dominate. It adds that the disclosure regime itself is an achievement — no other large democracy compels this granularity of self-exposure — and that the education and asset data prove the mirror works. It notes, fairly, that wealth in politics reflects the cost of campaigning that law itself inflates, and that barring charge-framed candidates hands any hostile police force a veto over the ballot.

All of this is granted, and the reader should mark how much of it this book accepts. Now watch what the defence cannot do. It cannot explain why the same parties that plead presumption of innocence refuse the remedy that would vindicate it: fast trials. If the charges are largely false, a day-to-day trial concluding in a year — precisely what the Law Commission proposed and the 2014 Court direction ordered — would acquit the innocent swiftly and cleanse the record publicly. The state that files chargesheets in weeks somehow cannot schedule hearings for decades. Selective efficiency is not an anomaly of the system; it is the system's signature, and it appeared in Chapter Two (accounts released years late, explanatory notes missing) and Chapter Five (surveys withheld until after elections). The presumption of innocence, honored sincerely, demands speedy adjudication. Honoured strategically, it becomes a permanent deferral dressed as a principle — innocence presumed, verdict postponed, seat retained.

Nor can the defence explain the parties' refusal to act on purely voluntary grounds. The 2018 Court asked for no legislation — only that parties *publicise* the charges of the candidates they themselves chose. Publishing true information cannot violate anyone's rights, and costs a newspaper insertion. Every party refused, together. When an industry colludes on price we call it a cartel; when parties collude on opacity, we call it competitive democracy. And the final move available to the defence — *voters choose freely, and choice legitimizes* — collides with the book's own Chapter Four: the same electorate is being paid, informed by defied publicity orders, and offered a menu curated by winnability statistics that systematically exclude the clean candidate of modest means. Choice exercised inside a rigged market ratifies the rigging; it does not sanctify it.

Why This Chapter Belongs Here

Every failure documented in the preceding chapters ultimately passes through one building. PM CARES sits outside the CAG's jurisdiction because a statute-and-trust architecture that Parliament could rewrite chooses not to. The Representation of the People Act, the RTI amendments, the CAG's mandate, the IBC, the RBI circular withdrawn under pressure, the budget lines that pay interest before roads — all of it is authored, amended, or left untouched by the 543 men and women this chapter has profiled from their own sworn words. A book about institutional failure that skips the legislature would be an autopsy that declines to open the chest.

And the connection runs deeper than jurisdiction. Chapter One's bridges fall because inspection regimes exist on paper and enforcement does not; Chapter Six is that gap, embodied and elected. Chapter Three's fabricated trainees persisted because no actor with power bore the cost of caring; the actors with power are, half of them, managing their own dockets. Chapter Four's cash-for-votes economy and this chapter's crores-per-seat economy are the same market viewed from opposite ends — and the legislature is where both prices are set, by the only participants guaranteed to be present at the closing bell.

There is a reason this book places the hardest-to-dispute material first. The reader who has walked from the monsoon's audit of concrete to the affidavit archive of Parliament has travelled from corruption you can touch to corruption you can *read* — sworn, filed, digitized, published by the state's own machinery, and acted upon by that machinery not at all. Between those two poles lies the full range of the subject. What remains — Part III's restructuring of banks, coal, and bankruptcy, and Part IV's harder allegations — concerns not whether the system notices its failures, but who paid for the occasions when it decided, quietly and legally, to look away.

Sources and further reading

Primary: ADR/National Election Watch, *Lok Sabha Elections 2024: Analysis of Criminal and Financial Background of Winning Candidates* (June 2024, with full data kit) — all criminal-case, serious-case, conviction-declaration, asset, education, gender, and win-probability figures; ADR, *Comparison of Pending Cases and Convictions Declared by Elected Representatives* (cumulative since 2008 — the 4,807 / 24-conviction series); Supreme Court, *Lily Thomas v. Union of India*, Writ Petition (C) No. 593 of 2005, decided July 10, 2013 (Patnaik & Mukhopadhaya, JJ.) — striking down s.8(4) RPA; Supreme Court, *Public Interest Foundation v. Union of India*, (2019) 3 SCC 224, decided September 25, 2018 (five-judge bench, Misra C.J.) — refusal to bar charge-framed candidates, publicity directions, "immense anguish" passage; Law Commission of India, *244th Report on Electoral Disqualifications* (February 2014) — framing-of-charges recommendation and safeguards, Rajagopalachari quotation, Vohra Committee characterization, 2004–14 candidate data; Vohra Committee Report, Ministry of Home Affairs (1993); ECI Order of October 10, 2018 implementing the publicity directions (formats, three-publication rule, Form 26 item 6A); amicus curiae reports in *In Re: Special Courts for Trial of MPs/MLAs* (2017–2025) — pending-case

counts, chief-minister findings, state-wise aging of cases; Supreme Court direction of March 10, 2014 (one-year trial completion); December 2020 three-judge ruling on standards for staying convictions (*Rambilas Gopalrao Deshmukh*).

Secondary: Economic Times and Business Standard (June 6, 2024) on the ADR tabulations; NDTV (no-illiterate-MP analysis, 18th Lok Sabha); ThePrint (2025) on the amicus's tardy-progress report; The Hindu (September 25, 2018) on the Constitution Bench; New Indian Express (October 3, 2019) on the Kerala CEO's compliance notices; ADR releases (April 11, 2019; 2025 blog) documenting universal violation of the publicity mandate.

Before print: the amicus-report figures circulate with two conflicting totals (4,192 per ThePrint's January 2025 reading; 4,732 per ADR's blog, both dated to early 2025) — pull the actual court-record compilation and reconcile, stating the cutoff explicitly; press summaries of the amicus report contain apparent mislabeling of one officeholder (an opposition leader described as a chief minister) — verify every individual-level claim against the filing itself or omit individual names entirely; refresh Rajya Sabha and MLA percentages at press time, as they drift with vacancies and by-elections; confirm the December 2020 stay-of-conviction citation against the reported judgment; and obtain ECI's own compliance-tracking records, if any exist, via RTI — their absence, if confirmed, belongs in the text.